

Ricky Martin Foundation

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Thank you, Chairman Smith, and members of the Committee.

I am here today to raise awareness on an urgent problem and confront the market of human trafficking. Our enemy is rich – human trafficking generates anywhere from \$12 to \$32 billion annually, surpassed only by the trafficking of arms and drugs. Yet we are without a global commitment to fight and end this scourge. I hope today is the beginning of a new offensive on this blight.

My name is Ricky Martin, Goodwill Ambassador to UNICEF, and President of the Ricky Martin Foundation. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today on “Enhancing the Global Fight to End Human Trafficking,” an issue that is very important to me.

My commitment and passion for this issue was born from a humbling moment. In 2002, when traveling in Calcutta, I met three little girls. They were living on the street, maybe days away from being sold into prostitution, trembling beneath plastic bags. I knew then that I had to do something about it. I could not turn away.

That was four years ago. It has been a long journey from Calcutta to Washington, from meeting three victims of child trafficking to testifying in front of the United States Congress. The common theme is we must raise awareness and take action to end human trafficking.

My interest and commitment on this issue didn't start yesterday. It began three years ago when we launched People for Children – the flagship program of the Ricky Martin Foundation, a non-profit organization whose mission is to advocate for children's rights and provide well-being in three crucial areas: social justice, education and health. The Ricky Martin Foundation, established in Puerto Rico in 2000, was created to be a vehicle to enforce children's rights in partnership with other organizations, socially responsible corporations and committed citizens. I needed to tell the story of those who cannot tell their own.

Child trafficking is a global nightmare. It is the modern day form of slavery. Despite the nature of child trafficking, few people understand the scope of the tragedy. The facts, however, speak for themselves:

- Each year 2 million people are victims of human trafficking.
- Of those, UNICEF estimates 1.2 million children are trafficked each year.
- Every country on this planet is entangled in the child trafficking web, either as a source, a destination, or a transit point.

At a time when children should be learning to read and write, they are forced to enter the world of trafficking. Public safety mechanisms, designed to protect, are paid to look the other way or, worse, to cooperate in this criminal activity.

Traffickers have many different faces. They are members of highly sophisticated networks of organized crime; they are family members; they are friends of the victims; and often, they are former victims of trafficking themselves.

But despite the serious and widespread nature of child trafficking, few people understand the magnitude of the tragedy. The effects of trafficking can be found on every continent:

- In Mexico, an estimated 5,000 children are involved in prostitution, pornography and sex tourism.
- In Thailand, there are about 200,000 children involved in its sex trade, and 86% of the patrons are local.
- In Africa, 200,000 boys and girls are trafficked and forced to work on plantations, mines, fishing boats, and brothels each year.

- In Brazil, about half a million children work as prostitutes. Many of them are trafficked to the gold mines of the Amazon.
- And in the United States 50,000 women and children are trafficked from no fewer than 49 countries every year.

We must also recognize that human trafficking does not happen in isolation, but rather that its roots lie in poverty and hopelessness. Supporting the children and families at risk of being exploited by traffickers will help them avoid exploitation.

I commend Congressman Smith, Congressman Lantos, members of this Committee, and the United States government for their efforts to combat child trafficking through the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its reauthorization in 2002 and 2005. This landmark anti-trafficking law addresses the prevention of trafficking, the protection and assistance of victims of trafficking, and the prosecution and punishment of traffickers. Over 100 countries have also passed anti-trafficking laws.

I commend the U.S. State Department-issued Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report, which provides information about trafficking and puts countries with doubtful commitment to ending human trafficking on notice. And I thank the US government for the \$375 million in anti-trafficking assistance to foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations you have provided since 2001 to help abolish human trafficking.

As a public figure, I understand that – if used correctly and strategically – I could use my position and my foundation to influence the discussion at this time. The opportunity to testify before this committee today is a privilege but, more importantly, I hope it will trigger action to end this human suffering.

I am committed to continue to work with the United Nations and the State Department to call for strong, strong commitments to eradicate trafficking. I will continue to work with the Inter-American Development Bank and International Organization for Migration to develop and distribute the Call and Live! PSA's to increase awareness of this issue. I will continue to encourage organizations such as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism), Save the Children and UNICEF to keep up the excellent work they do at assisting victims and providing services to them.

I am here today not only to explain what I have witnessed, but to motivate this Congress to action. The stories I share with you are stories of real children facing real exploitation.

When I met the little girls in India, they had no idea what their life could have become. Today they live in a beautiful shelter in Calcutta with another 167 girls that have been rescued from the streets. They are studying, going to school, learning music – being children. There is hope that if we act, children will not be lost into the world of modern day slavery. In the face of hopelessness, action can bring hope. I come before you today to urge action.

Our action steps must start with basic commitments.

1. We must enforce the laws against human trafficking by providing children and their families with the opportunity to live safely and peacefully.
2. We must educate children and families about the dangers of trafficking.
3. We must provide resources and services to reintegrate and rehabilitate victims of these practices.
4. We must prosecute and punish the traffickers.

The common slogan, “Think Globally – Act Locally,” is an appropriate starting point for outlining effective action against human trafficking and the exploitation of children.

Thinking globally, we must call for international standards on birth certificates. This simple act of registering every child is vital for the protection of their safety and rights. According to UNICEF, 50 million children are not registered at birth. Without documentation of their existence these children are invisible, and all other mechanisms of support, safety, and human rights cannot be successful.

An international standard to universally define a child as 18 years of age or younger is a necessary and important component of uniting international law and developing more effective international interventions.

To act locally, I would recommend that Congress take action to:

- Expand federally funded initiatives for Internet crimes against children
- Establish a division on child trafficking in the TIP report
- Increase the funding for anti-trafficking assistance to foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations.

Lastly, the people of the United States can demonstrate a commitment on this issue by calling for the US government to ratify the Charter of the Convention of Rights of the Child. This is a cornerstone of human rights. The United States is one of only two countries (Somalia being the other) yet to ratify this charter. On matters such as this, the United States should be the first, not the last.

Until we as a world community acknowledge this is a real problem, we will never effectively eliminate it. Let us begin to fight this battle with real policy change and real action. Let us work together to create a world in which the basic rights of all individuals are respected, and our children can be safe and live without fear.

Human trafficking has no place in our world today.

React. It's time.

Thank you.